Gender equality, poverty eradication and the Millennium Development Goals: promoting women's capabilities and participation

Professor Naila Kabeer,
Institute of Development Studies,
Sussex.

Presentation for the inaugural session of the Committee on Emerging Social Issues, UN-ESCAP, Bangkok, 4ᵗʰ September, 2003

Introduction: the rationale for a gender perspective on the MDGs

I would like to organise this talk on the theme of gender equality in the context of the Millennium Development Goals*. I will conclude it with some reflections on the issues of women's capacity and participation, which are the specific concerns of today's panel. Let me start by presenting three reasons why gender analysis is relevant to all aspects of development, both the economic and the social, and more specifically to the core MDG of halving world poverty by 2015. The first reason is that, while gender

inequality is not the only, or even the most marked, form of inequality in a society... it is the most pervasive. It is a feature of social relations in most societies, although it may take different forms in different societies. Consequently, understanding the causes and consequences of gender inequality, and the power relations which give rise to them, should be of concern to all societies in the world, rich as well as poor.

The second reason is that gender inequality is also pervasive within societies, cutting across all other forms of socio-economic differentiation so that it is a feature of rich as well as poor groups, racially dominant as well as racially subordinate groups, privileged as well as 'untouchable' castes. However, the intersection of gender discrimination with economic deprivation tends to produce intensified forms of disadvantage, more often for women and girls rather than for men and boys. Thus while a gender analyses of poverty would the problem in terms of the unequal relationships between women and men, girls and boys, it is most often concerned with explaining, and seeking to tackle, the greater disadvantage of women and girls.

The final reason that gender is relevant to all aspects of development is that gender relations structure the relations of production and reproduction within every known society. Gita Sen puts the implications of this point well:

A gender perspective means recognising that women stand at the crossroads between production and reproduction, between economic activity and the care of human beings, and therefore between economic growth and human development. They are workers in both spheres - those most responsible and therefore
with most at stake, those who suffer most when the two spheres meet at cross-purposes, and those most sensitive to the need for better integration between the two. It is this positioning of women at the intersection of productive and reproductive activities that gives rise to potential synergies and trade-offs which policymakers need to be aware of in their attempts to achieve the MDGs. It also means that the MDGs, each of which relate to a particular form of deprivation or shortfall, cannot be achieved in isolation from structural inequalities which gave rise to them. If gender inequality is part and parcel of the processes of poverty and discrimination in a society, then attempts to address it must constitute part and parcel of measures to eradicate these conditions.

The geography of gender inequality

There are a number of other points that need to be explicitly integrated into gender-aware analysis and approaches to the achievement of the MDGs. First of all, the nature of gender relationships, the inequalities which they embody, vary considerably, leading to a 'geography of gender inequality'. As a result, the role that women play in production and reproduction, and the recognition that they are given, vary considerably.

In particular, we find that in those regions of the world where women's ability to move in the public domain has been severely restricted by social norms, and where households are organised are corporate lines, with control over family resources, labour and decision-making largely vested in the hands of the senior male, gender discrimination takes very extreme forms, often
leading to excess levels of female mortality in almost every age group, but particular among the very young. These are the regions responsible for Amartya Sen’s 'missing women' phenomenon.

Elsewhere, where women’s mobility in the public domain is not as severely restricted, where they participate in the paid work force, where control over resources and labour takes a less unified and more 'segmented' form, discrimination is evident, but it does not take quite the same life threatening form.

Men, boys and development

We should also bear in mind that while a gender analysis generally uncovers the persistence of female disadvantage, men and boys are also central to such analysis for a number of reasons. First of all, issues of poverty and disadvantage have both an absolute dimension and a relative one. In some cases, our concern may be with absolute levels of female deprivation because of their implications for certain kinds of policy: the nutritional status of mothers, for instance, has implications for the birth-weight of babies, regardless of the nutritional status of fathers. In other cases, however, it is women’s disadvantage relative to men which will be the main focus because of their implications for other kinds of policy concerns, particularly concerns with equity and efficiency. In such cases, we will need to know about women’s deprivation relative to men, girls’ deprivation relative to boys.
Secondly, there are contexts and situations where it is men and boys who may suffer relative disadvantage - excess male mortality in Russia is one widely cited example; boys' educational underperformance in the Caribbean is another. Alternatively, male disadvantage may take a different form from female: for instance, economic recession may be experienced by men as loss of employment and their status as family breadwinner and by women as an extension in their hours of work as they strive to compensate for the family's reduced circumstances. Furthermore, because the problems faced by women and men may be two sides of the same coin of family deprivation, and because families remain bound by relations of co-operation as well as conflict, men and boys have to part of any equation to address these problems.

And thirdly, models of masculinity and femininity prevalent in a society have been found to differentiate both the needs and priorities expressed by women and men as well as their capacity to address these needs and priorities. In many cases, models of masculinity to which men aspire, and which women may support, can constitute a major barrier to the ability of household members to escape from poverty. If we do not understand how men as well as women perceive social norms, our efforts to transform those which are unjust are likely to be hampered.

Making connections

Gender analysis is about the ability to make connections which are not always apparent partly because of the compartmentalised modes of thinking
imposed by disciplinary boundaries and administrative divisions and partly because of the various kinds of biases and preconceptions which cloud understanding of the nature of gender inequality. One set of connections, highlighted in the quote from Gita Sen, relates to the connections between production and reproduction, between economic growth and human development. A second set of connections is between the different levels of analysis: micro, meso and macro (and increasingly, the global). Macro-level forces are the product of, and in turn influence, the actions and interactions of people, women as well as men, located in the different institutional domains of society.

A third set of connections is between different domains of society. While relationships within households and families are inherently gendered and their inequalities justified through familial ideologies, gender discrimination is not confined to the private domain of the home. It also operates through the institutionalised norms and practices of public institutions of state, markets and society so that private and public inequalities serve to reinforce each other. Despite their purported neutrality, markets cannot dissolve these inequalities because of the unequal terms on which men and women enter the market and women’s continued, unpaid and usually unacknowledged, responsibilities in the home. Public policy can play an important role here in both in offsetting these disadvantages as well as actively helping to transform the institutional norms and practices which gave rise to them. Let me now turn more explicitly a number of the key goals outlined by the Millennium Summit: the halving of world poverty, human development goals and the goal of women’s empowerment.
Gender inequality and income poverty: making connections

It is one of the major omissions in the current formulation of the MDG of halving world poverty that it does not make any explicit mention of gender. If this results in the neglect of the gender dimensions of poverty in policy efforts to halve world poverty, then the international community have made a profound error. While we clearly cannot generalise about the relationship between gender inequality and income poverty, there are certain 'stylised facts' we can point to which tell us about the importance of the relationship and the forms it takes in different contexts.

In those parts of the world where there are powerful social norms restricting women's ability to take up public forms of employment, we find that women's participation in paid work tends to be a strong correlate of poverty in both urban and rural areas. In countries like India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, female labour force participation is highest in the poorest households and tends to decline as households become better off. It is not that women stop working, but that their work takes a different form: homebased, and often unpaid.

Elsewhere, domestic responsibilities may still constrain women's ability to access labour market opportunities, but they do not prevent them from taking up paid employment in the public domain. The relationship between women's employment and household poverty is likely to be somewhat different in these contexts. In Chile, it was found that women were
unemployed only in the very poorest households while in Jamaica, the poorest households were those whose female head had been unemployed for a prolonged period of time. In rural Vietnam, household poverty was associated with women’s inability to diversify out of rice farming in the northern part of the country while in the south it was associated with their participation in agricultural wage labour.

More generally - in both rich and poor countries - household poverty determines, and is determined by the nature of women’s participation in the labour market. All poor households rely on the economic contributions of their able-bodied members but are made poorer when some of these members are systematically confined to the lower echelons of the informal economy in casualised wage work, in undercapitalised own-account work, in home-based piece work or in unpaid family labour. The relationship between household poverty and women’s paid activity has, if anything, become more visible over the past decades, partly in response to economic crisis and the ‘push’ into the labour market and partly in response to new opportunities generated in the course of globalisation. Women are now active in wage labour on a historically unprecedented scale but at a time when labour markets have become increasingly deregulated and labour increasingly reduced to the status of a commodity.

The goals of both poverty eradication and gender equity demand, not that women be privileged over men in access to employment, but that both be able to access decent forms of work and on the same terms. Policy makers need to consider both the quantity of employment available to the poor, and
to poor women in particular, as well as the quality. They need to consider measures for improving returns to women’s work and for helping them to secure better terms and conditions. And they need to ensure that both women and men have access to safety nets and forms of social protection that will tide them over in times of crisis. What we know from the experience of countries that have not sacrificed equity to growth is that such forms of protection work best when they are built on principles of cross-class solidarity, supported by all and supporting all.

Gender inequality and human development: making the connections

There are equity arguments for integrating gender analysis into efforts to achieve human development. Gender inequalities in hunger, health, mortality rates, education and skills are pervasive in many parts of the world and they reflect some of the factors already talked about: institutionalised norms and practices and the kinds of options that women and girls face relative to men and boys. They also reflect the operation of discrimination in the context of poverty. This is particularly well illustrated in the data on household responses to crisis: increases in women’s work to compensate for male unemployment tends to add to already long hours of work, leading to fatigue and ‘burn-out’; girl children are often withdrawn in larger numbers than boys from school, undermining their chances of moving out of poverty in the future; the reduction of already meagre levels of consumption in ways that impinge on women’s and girls’ wellbeing to a greater extent than men’s and boys’ (higher levels of excess female mortality in times of famine or drought; seasonal fluctuations in women’s bodyweight, but not in men’s).
We need to address these forms of gender inequality because they violate principle of justice and equity. However there are also instrumental arguments for integrating gender analysis into the achievement of MDGS. They link inequalities in some of the human development outcomes identified by the Millennium Summit to gender inequalities in the kinds of agency permitted to women and girls in different parts of the world and to the successes and failures of different governments in addressing these inequalities. These arguments draw on evidence that suggests that enhancing women’s agency, through improving their access to critical resources, such as income, is an important route through which improvements in human development could be achieved among poor households. This may entail improvements in overall levels of well-being among household members as well as by closing gender gaps in well-being. There are synergies here that need to be made central to the achievement of the MDGs.

Gender equality and women’s empowerment: connecting capabilities and participation

The final set of arguments about gender equality in the context of development relates once again to the importance of women’s capacity to exercise agency but this time focuses on forms of agency which are in the interests of women themselves, in other words, forms of agency which express the goals of women’s empowerment and gender justice. There are a variety of ways in which women can be empowered, including through access
to the economic, social and political resources identified by the MDGs. These resources represent the capabilities that women can bring to bear in defending their rights and dignity as human beings while their ability to participate in the various processes of decision-making, private as well as public, which impinge on their lives and wellbeing are the critical forms of agency we are talking about. In that sense, it is this set of goals which brings us closest to the concerns of this meeting.

The MDGs prioritise women's access to certain kind of resources as indicative of their empowerment: social (closing the gender gap in education), economic (increase in women's access to waged employment in the non-agricultural sector) and political (increase in the number of seats held by women in parliament). Clearly many other examples could have been prioritised as well as or instead of these but I will take these as the starting point for my discussion of the question of women's capabilities and participation. There are lessons to be learnt from studies which demonstrate that access to particular resources have helped women to empower themselves, but equally there are lessons to learn from studies that suggest the reverse. Unpacking these different outcomes to consider their underlying causes draws attention to the underlying social relationships through which they were brought about.

Education, capabilities and participation

Let us start with education, both an aspect of human capital as well as human capabilities, and one that has been given increasing prominence in
recent years. Education is not simply about jobs, it is also about access to new knowledge, information and ideas as well as the capacity to use these effectively. These are enhancements of the capabilities that individuals bring to their goals in many areas of life, aside from the labour market. They explain some of the correlation between women’s education and various human development outcomes I referred to earlier. Findings from various DHS and other studies show that the chances that women will attend antenatal clinics, that births will be attended by trained medical personnel, that complete immunization of children will take place and that sick children will receive timely and effective medical care are consistently affected by mother’s education, an effect which is particularly strong in poorer areas where proper health services are not available. In such contexts, education puts women at an advantage in processing and utilising new information and accessing available services. It also increases their capacity to deal with the outside world, including the world of health service providers.

Education increases the likelihood that women will look after their own, as well as family, well-being. A study from rural Zimbabwe exploring the likelihood of women taking up contraception and ante-natal care, both with positive implications for the reduction of maternal mortality, found that among the factors that increased it were education and paid work. Women with low levels of education were less likely to seek pre-natal care within the first trimester of their pregnancy and to continue to visit ante-natal facilities throughout their pregnancy.
Education may have an impact on power relations within the home. In Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe, educated women were found to have more leverage in bargaining within their families and husbands and a greater say in spending household income than uneducated women. In rural Bangladesh, educated women in rural areas were likely to participate in a wider range of decisions than uneducated women.

Educated women also appear less likely to suffer from domestic violence. A study from Calcutta in West Bengal notes that educated women were better able to deal the violent husbands: 'access to secondary stages of education may have an important contributory role in enhancing women's capacity to exercise control in their lives'...through a combination of literacy and numeracy skills, and enhanced self-esteem (Sen, , p. 12). A similar finding was documented in rural Bangladesh. My own work in Bangladesh suggests that women put a great deal of store by education for their daughters as a means to make sure that they will be able to stand up to their husbands and a resource to fall back on should they ever need to become independent.

At the same time, there are other less positive findings that suggest that the value given to education and how it is utilised will be mediated the wider context in which it is provided. In societies which are characterised by extreme forms of gender inequality, not only is women's access to education more likely to be curtailed by various forms of restrictions on their mobility and by their limited role in the wider economy but the effects of education are also more curtailed. Where women's role in society is defined purely in
reproductive terms, education is perceived in terms of equipping girls to be better wives and mothers or increasing their chances of getting a suitable husband. Although these are legitimate aspirations given the realities of the society, they do little to equip girls and women to question the world around them and the subordinate status assigned to them. Indeed, findings from rural India that educated mothers reported higher levels of excess female mortality among daughters, particularly those born later, suggests that education can increase women’s effective agency in lethal, as well as benevolent, ways.

A second set of qualifications concerning education as a route to women’s empowerment relate to the power relations embodied in the delivery of education, particularly the formal educational system. The content of education can often serves to mirror and legitimate wider social inequalities, denigrating physical labour, largely the preserve of the poor, and domestic activities largely the preserve of women. Gender stereotyping in the curriculum, particularly in text books, serve to reinforce traditional gender roles within society and to act as a barrier to the kind of futures that girls are able to imagine for themselves. Indeed, the design of education has often reinforced the biases of many parents that the purpose of schooling is to prepare girls for their domestic roles. This leaves them with few options in terms of earning their living, except in poorly-paid, casualised forms of work on the margins of the labour market, and curtails the potential of education to transform their life chances.
Social inequalities are also reproduced through interactions within the schooling system. There is evidence of widespread gender bias among teachers: 'boys receive more attention than girls from the teacher.

Interviews with teachers confirm the resilient influence of gender stereotypes, including a dim view of the abilities and potential of female children'. The absence, or minority presence, of female teachers is likely to be a problem in many contexts. Reinforcing the male dominance of public services, it can act as a barrier to girls' access to, and completion of schooling. The 'hidden curriculum' of school practice reinforces messages about girls' inferior status on a daily basis and provides them with negative learning experience, thus creating a culture of low self-esteem and low aspirations. The abusive behaviour meted out to girls within the educational system in a number of countries has also been documented. While in some cases, sexual relationships between boys and girls were consensual, more often they were found to be abusive, entered into by girls under coercion from older male students as well as male teachers.

These limitations do not negate the earlier more positive findings, but they do serve to caution against assuming that effects will be uniform across all contexts and they points to the various aspects of educational provision which militate, not only against it empowerment potential but also against it ability to attract and retain women and girls, particularly those from poor backgrounds. Moreover, the fact that many more women in many more parts of the world play a critical role in earning household livelihoods, and increasing numbers of women head their own households, has not yet found its way into the design of educational curriculum, either within the formal
schooling system or in later vocational training. We need to reconsider the meaning of education and its potential to improve the capabilities of subordinate groups, including their capacity to play a more active role in their own lives. Here, innovative programmes like ActionAid’s REFLECT can help to provide a new light on what education could do for adults as well as children who have been failed by the formal schooling system.

Paid work, capabilities and participation

Studies of the effects of women’s access to paid work also provide a contradictory set of conclusions. There is persuasive evidence to suggest that access to paid work can enhance women’s agency in critical ways. In fact, by certain criteria, even paid work carried out within the home can serve to shift the balance of power within the family. Studies of Bangladeshi homeworkers in the UK, women engaged in industrial homework in Mexico City, women recipients of microcredit services in a variety of different contexts all testify to the importance women’s ability to contribute to their households’ survival and security to their own sense of self-worth and the ability to have a say in household decision-making.

However, by and larger, the strongest effects of paid work in destabilising power relations, both within and outside the family, is suggested by the literature relating to women’s access to wage employment. Some of this evidence comes from the agricultural sector in a number of countries where studies document a perceptible shift in women’s agency as result of entry into waged labour opportunities generated by the expansion of non-
traditional agricultural exports. However changes in women’s life chances as a result of entry into waged work appear more marked when the focus is on the non-agricultural sector. This is partly because such employment is generally associated with migration by women out of rural areas and away from the patriarchal controls of kinship and community. The conclusion of a study on Chinese women working in export factories echoes that of a number of other such studies from around the world: ‘we cannot dismiss as meaningless the voices of the many young women who affirm a sense of achievement and pride in the lives they make for themselves as factory workers…..And hardship may be a price worth paying if the cash they earn allows them to change something they disliked in their past or that they wish to avoid in their future’.

At the same time, many of these studies also point to the highly exploitative conditions of work entailed in industries which seek to compete internationally through the promotion of flexible labour practices. Extremely long hours of work during busy seasons are often combined with lay-offs in the slack season; health hazards......Many women who leave rural areas to take up jobs in the towns in order to make new friends and build a life for themselves do not have time to take up such opportunities. The division of labour in domestic chores and child care is rarely renegotiated across the genders so that, despite their increased labour input into paid work, women (particularly married women) either continue to bear the main burden of domestic work, or share it with other female members of the household, often their daughters. By and large, gender inequalities in work burdens appear to be intensified.
Finally, the attention to export oriented manufacturing and agriculture should not detract attention from the fact that the vast majority of working women do not work in these sectors but are to be found in the informal economy concentrated in the most casualised forms of waged labour and low-value own-account enterprise. It is difficult to see how earnings generated by prostitution, domestic service or daily labour on construction sites which is where the poorest women are likely to be found will do a great deal to undermine women’s subordinate status at home or at work.

Here organisational capacity is a critical precondition for any struggle for rights at work and certainly the right to organise is recognised as a core social principle by the international community. There has been a great deal of controversy about whether labour standards, including the right to organise, can be improved through trade sanctions. Whatever the outcome of this debate, it is important to bear in mind that globally enforced labour standards will do little to change the lives and livelihoods of the vast majority of working women in the world who work in the informal economy where such standards are impossible, or impossibly expensive, to enforce. A more inclusive approach would be to institute a universal social floor of the kind mentioned earlier: supporting all and supported by all. Most poorer countries in the world have demonstrated a commitment to universal provision of basic services, such as health and education; many have sought to institute other measures to provide some degree of security to the vulnerable: low cost insurance, microfinance, public distribution systems and so on. The idea of a social floor does not rule out the possibility for
fighting for improved labour standards in the traded sector; it makes it more likely. Without some form of safety net to fall back on, the right to organise and to engage in collective bargaining will remain formal rather than real. And unless this safety net is built on principles of universalism, it is unlikely that it will fulfil its role of providing safety: services intended only for the poor will always remain poor services.

Voice, representation and women’s empowerment

The concern with the number of seats held by women in national parliaments moves the focus of empowerment into the arena of politics and into the struggle for voice and representation. Clearly, if the highest decision-making body in a country does not represent different interests among its citizenry, it cannot be held to be a particularly representative body. However, the greater participation of women in national political processes should be matched by, and indeed build on, greater participation in local political processes where poorer women are more likely to be able to exercise some voice.

There is evidence that governments can do a great deal to promote such participation. In India, where there is now 33% reservation of seats for women in local government, a number of states have added further inducements to local communities to encourage women’s participation. Madhya Pradesh and Kerala require one third of participants in the regular open village meetings be female before they are considered to form a quorum. Kerala earmarks 10% of development funds received by local
councils from the state to be used for ‘women’s development’ and managed by representative all female groups of the village assembly. The evidence suggests that as women become more accustomed to participation in local government, the benefits of their presence are becoming clearer. They have represented a different set of priorities from men, they have allocated funds differently from men and their leadership of village councils has led to more active participation by other women, a greater willingness to ask questions and to have addressed a request or complaint.

However, the formal political sphere is not the only sphere in which politics plays out. Examples of collective action by women which do not necessarily operate in the formal political sphere still constitute politically action because they seek to contest relations of dominance within the public domain or through public forms of struggle. The emphasis here is no longer on empowerment at the level of the individual or within the private domain - such change is important but it is limited in its effects - but on collective forms of action in the public domain. Struggles to improve the public provision of social services, to render them more responsive to the needs of poor people and of women, as citizens groups are attempting to do across the world; self help groups and microcredit groups formed around microfinancial services of various kinds; labour organisations that have sprung up to address the interests of women working in different sectors, including the informal economy; social movements around fair access to land, water and other vital resources; initiatives to promote greater awareness about HIV-AIDS which becomes a campaign for sex workers rights. Such organisations, like all forms of human agency, have a dynamic of their own: local struggles
go national or even international. What starts out as a welfare activity becomes transformed into a demand for recognition as citizens. Resistance to an infrastructure project starts an international debate about environmental sustainability. It is the building of these kinds of connections around some felt need or perceived injustice that women’s capabilities as individuals can be transformed into collective capabilities in the struggle for gender justice.